BOUNCING BACK AFTER A THUMPING:
RESILIENCY AMONG GUERRILLA UNITS

LTC (RETIRED) LESTER W. GRAU

> ***"If we have to fight, we will fight. You will kill 10 of our men and we will kill one of yours, and in the end it will be you who will tire of it."***
>
> **— Ho Chi Minh**
> *Prison Diary*[1]

"As a nation, we believed that history repeats itself. What happened in the 19th century to the invading British would also be the fate of the Soviet invaders. Philosophically, the Soviets believed that history is unidirectional, progressive and does not repeat itself. History did repeat itself and we did prevail."

— General Abdul Rahim Wardak
The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War [2]

Ho Chi Minh led the movement against the reestablishment of French colonial rule in Vietnam after World War II. The French Indochina War was a fight between different ethnic groups with different ideologies or faiths. The Soviet-Afghan War was also a fight between different ethnic groups with different ideologies or faiths. Both contests demonstrate that guerrilla warfare is a test of will and commitment.[3] Yet, will and commitment are not always enough to prevent defeat. What compels the guerrilla to fight on after tactical defeat? Is it a natural and cultural thing? It is ideology or religion? Is it monetary or political gain? Is it preservation of the family at the sacrifice of the individual? Why do some guerrilla movements survive and grow after severe defeats while others quickly fold after an apparently minor setback? Why are some peoples better at it than others? The answer may lie in history, with its thousands of guerrilla movements throughout recorded time.

What is a Guerrilla Force?

After the past decade, this seems a pretty obvious question. During this decade the United States has been involved in four guerrilla wars — one in Iraq, one in the Philippines, one in Columbia, and one in Afghanistan. The Iraqi guerrilla movement originated with the government-trained, government-armed, and government-led Fedayeen organization. It spread into a large-scale resistance backed by neighboring states, outside organizations (such as al Qaeda), religious groups, ethnic groups, dismissed soldiers, malcontents, and criminals. The Philippine insurrection was the continuation of a decades-old resistance by Islamic peoples. The Columbian insurgency began as a communist movement which supported itself through the production and sale of narcotics. It has evolved into a narcotics syndicate that occasionally justifies its behavior by citing a communist ideology. The guerrillas in Afghanistan organized themselves in part based on shattered conventional Taliban and al Qaeda forces, but more often based on local Pushtun communities justifying their struggle with the defense of Islam and the neighborhood. Guerrilla movements can be state-sponsored, ideologically derived, ethnicity-based, or created from local xenophobia or political or criminal opportunism.

A guerrilla force is usually not in uniform and blends with the local populace when not fighting. The guerrilla may be untrained or well trained, paid or unpaid, locally based or drawn from different regions or countries, armed with whatever is available or armed with the latest in weaponry. Some guerrilla forces are defeated tactically and quit. Others hang on despite repeated defeats. Factors that are common to resilient guerrilla forces are base camps/safe houses, redundant logistics, sanctuary, secure lines of communication, effective leadership, ethnicity, ideology/religion, geography, patience, recruitment, anonymity, and collective resolve.

Base Camps/Safe Houses

Base camps are normally areas that provide logistics, immediate medical care, and a staging area from which to mount ambushes, attacks, raids, and propaganda efforts. Safe houses are the urban equivalent. Base camps are usually located on difficult terrain with limited access routes and often double as forward logistics points for a larger area. Consequently, they are engineered for a stiff conventional fight and contain crew-served weapons, field fortifications, obstacles, and road blocks. Safe houses are not as robust and depend on the support or forbearance of the neighbors to survive. The base camp or safe house is usually the core of the local guerrilla resistance, and destruction of either often results in greatly reduced guerrilla activity until an alternate base camp is established. A base camp external to the urban area will often support several safe houses.

Redundant Logistics

Unless the area of the conflict is small, a guerrilla movement

will establish multiple logistics points so that the loss of one will not fatally cripple the movement. There may be a network of small caches, forward supply points, supply points, supply dumps, and even depots supporting the movement. The local availability of food and water will often determine the size of the facility, supporting transport required and area of operation. Secure logistics facilities can be quite large and perform maintenance and repair. Logistics points are usually co-located with base camps.

Patience is more than a virtue. The resilient guerrilla needs to be willing to fight for the long term. Guerrilla warfare does not have to be protracted, but the resilient guerrilla movement must be capable of making it so if that is key to their survival and success. Waiting out an opponent is an ancient guerrilla tactic that still works.

Sanctuary

A guerrilla force needs a safe area into which it can withdraw, especially if its base camp is overrun. There, the force can treat its wounded, rest, train, refit, recruit, plan and rebuild. Sanctuary areas are safe due to terrain (mountains, jungle), geographic location (across international borders), or location among a supportive population (Sadr City, the Pushtun tribal areas in Pakistan). Logistics facilities, medical care, veterinary care, training areas, and longer-term accommodations are often part of a sanctuary area. The presence of friendly civilians adds protection from air and artillery attack. A sanctuary area may contain a judicial facility, confinement facility, and other trappings of parallel governance. For the tactical leader, a base camp may be sanctuary, but the larger movement needs its own sanctuary. Exploratory peace talks may designate a specific geographic area for negotiations, providing an area of temporary sanctuary.[4] External support for guerrillas is not essential for resiliency, but permitted/tolerated sanctuary in a neighboring country is a very desirable thing.

Secure Lines of Communication

All warfare, conventional or guerrilla, is about lines of communication. The opposing commanders are concerned with preserving their own lines of advance, retreat and supply and interdicting those enemy lines.[5] Much of guerrilla tactics is "hit and run." Run is at least as important as hit, and the successful guerrilla commander has planned and secured his run line well before he hits. On an operational scale, maintaining the lines of retreat to sanctuary is essential for the guerrilla leader (and sometimes the conventional commander, e.g., French Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 and the British retreat from Kabul in 1842).

Leadership

A good guerrilla leader is a good military leader. Leadership is of prime importance and vulnerable. Senior guerrilla leaders most often reside in sanctuary, leaving the second-tier leaders to run the base camps and conduct the tactical fight.[6] Decapitation of the senior leadership does not always destroy a guerrilla movement, but it will certainly slow it down, particularly if the first and second tiers of guerrilla leadership are consistently eliminated. Charismatic leaders are the hardest to replace but are not always the best. Guerrilla staffs are essential for large movements, and their elimination can prove just as catastrophic to a guerrilla movement as the loss of a leader. Some guerrilla movements have an overall pyramidal structure with a single leader (Vietnam), where others have various competing guerrilla movements with different leaders (Afghanistan and Iraq). Decapitation is difficult in either case.

Ethnicity

Many guerrilla movements are based on ethnic identification and on perceived ethnic survival (the Chinese in the Malayan Insurgency, the Albanians in Kosovo, the Chechens). The dedicated ethnic guerrilla fights to preserve an identity, a way of life, and a heritage. Changing this loyalty or co-opting its adherents is a very tall order for psychological operations, land reform, or constitutional reform --- traditional approaches to winning the population away from supporting the guerrilla.

Ideology/Religion

Marxism-Leninism did not die with the Soviet Union. Maoism stalks South Asia and the Pacific. Religion matters. Ideology and religion produce true believers who will gladly blow themselves and others up in the name of the greater good. Guerrilla movements based on ideological or religious convictions are hard to suppress. Like ethnicity, it is a matter of honor, loyalty, and deep-held belief.

Geography

It is tough to be a guerrilla on an open plain. It is much easier in the mountains, jungle, deep forest, wide river delta, or sympathetic neighborhood. These are also the areas in which it is hard for conventional forces to maneuver and where technology is less effective. However, the geography should not be so challenging that survival and finding food become the guerillas' primary task.

Patience

Patience is more than a virtue. The resilient guerrilla needs to be willing to fight for the long term. Guerrilla warfare does not have to be protracted, but the resilient guerrilla movement must be capable of making it so if that is key to survival and success. Waiting out an opponent is an ancient guerrilla tactic that still works. The adage "you have the watches, but we have the time" is appropriate against an external occupation force that has no desire to remain indefinitely.

Recruitment

Guerrillas die, sicken, get hurt, grow old, or desert and have to be replaced. Successful guerrilla campaigns require ever-larger forces. The guerrilla leader must have sufficient charisma, and the ideological/religious/ethnic appeal or rewards system must be strong enough to attract a steady stream of recruits for the cause.

Anonymity

A guerrilla force is a secret society with its own rituals, special signs, and requirements. A well-placed informer can destroy the entire organization. Anonymity is particularly important during the initial phase of a guerrilla war. A resilient guerrilla force is one that vets and controls its membership and can hide in plain view.[7]

Collective Resolve

Some peoples are more pugnacious and jealous of their turf than others. They will fight just because an outsider is on their territory without their permission. This inherent cussedness explains why some nations accept outside occupation and domination with barely more than a muffled mutter of protest, while other peoples quickly organize themselves to drive the outsider away. Some folks are just naturally warlike while others would rather see if they can wait it out. This is not to say that national passive-aggressiveness will not work. Some peoples are just more disposed to squeezing triggers.

Conclusion

Successful guerrilla campaigns usually follow three phases. The guerrillas form, train, and bond during the first or incipient phase. The guerrilla campaign is most vulnerable during this phase, and concerted opposition can readily destroy the movement. The second phase is the attack phase, where the guerrilla force begins to contest turf with its rival. The tactics are hit and run. The guerrilla campaign is still very vulnerable during this phase, particularly during retreat to sanctuary. For the counterguerrilla force, the key to success is the ability to project sufficient power over distance and conduct a successful pursuit. For the resilient guerrilla, the key to success is securing lines of retreat to sanctuary. During the third phase, the guerrilla conducts attacks and retains territory. The guerrilla force is stronger and its vulnerability is often a function of overextension or refusal to abandon recently acquired chunks of territory. During the third phase, the resilient guerrilla force is able to reconstitute itself rapidly through recruiting, logistics strength, and leadership.

Guerrilla forces are like snowflakes in that no two are exactly alike. Resiliency among guerrilla forces is not quantifiable. However, the above factors keep appearing in the histories of guerrilla conflicts.[8] Not all the factors are always present, but most of them are. Ultimately the process that seems to work in bringing resilient guerrillas to heel is to move against the guerrillas' families. Forced relocation of families and villages into camps and government-controlled villages or other programs that threaten to destroy the core values and identity of a tribe or people seem to have the best results. These programs win no prizes for humanitarian principles, and sometimes backfire by forcing the guerrilla to fight to the bitter end.

Endnotes

[1] Ho Chi Minh, *Prison Diary* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962).

[2] Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998).

[3] Some authors distinguish among insurgents (those who fight against their established government but do not have a legal belligerent status), partisans (light troops making raids and forays against any enemy, usually as guerrillas), and guerrillas (those who carry out irregular warfare as a member of an independent unit). Irregular warfare involves irregulars (non-soldiers) who do not conform to some or all rules of warfare, accepted tactics or military professionalism. None of these definitions are particularly precise, so for the purposes of this article the term "guerrilla" is used as a blanket designation, on the assumption that the reader will recognize one when he sees one.

[4] Geoff Demarest, *Winning Insurgent War: Back to Basics*, Second Edition, (Fort Leavenworth: Foreign Military Studies Office, 2011) 352.

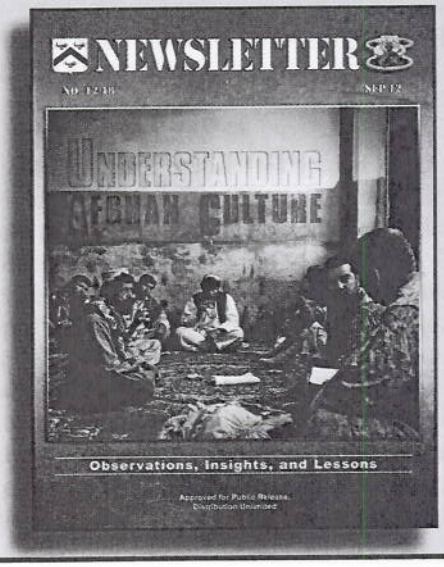
[5] T. Miller Maguire, *Outlines of Military Geography* (London: C. J. Clay & Sons, 1899) 21-22.

[6] Demarest, 238-239.

[7] Ibid, 2-3.

[8] A good start is the two volume set of Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1975).

LTC (Retired) Lester W. Grau currently serves as the research coordinator for the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. He served 26 years as an Infantryman and a Soviet Foreign Area Officer. He fought in Vietnam and served most of his duty time overseas in Germany, South Korea, the Soviet Union, and the Netherlands. He is the author of three books on the Soviet-Afghan War, two books on Afghanistan, and another on Soviet guerrilla warfare. He has been contributing articles to *INFANTRY* Magazine since 1985.



CENTER FOR ARMY LESSONS LEARNED

NEWSLETTER NO. 12-18:

UNDERSTANDING AFGHAN CULTURE

This newsletter contains a collection of previously published articles that focus on Afghan culture and provides insight into effectively communicating with Afghans in order to achieve positive results. More specifically, the articles contained in this newsletter highlight methods to initiate and improve relationships with Afghans, the difficulties and challenges leaders and Soldiers experienced in communicating with Afghans, what worked and did not work, and how to foster and improve meaningful relationships with Afghans to achieve the desired outcome. This newsletter can be accessed online at http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/call/index.asp.